

## Hebrews 11:1–2

The Christian life is a life of faith. Faith is the instrument by which we receive the benefits of Christ's saving work. The author of Hebrews knows that if his readers are to enter into eternal life, it will be through the possession and the exercise of faith in Christ (**Heb. 10:39**).

Many Christians view Hebrews 11 as a list of the "heroes of faith," whom believers are to follow. The author of Hebrews does urge Christians to imitate the persevering faith of the OT saints in Heb 11 (**Heb 6:11-12**) but this is not its primary concern.

**Summary: In Hebrews 11, the author presents OT believers as witnesses who, having received divine testimony, participated in, and point to, those unseen, hoped for realities which have been brought to fulfillment by Christ.**

**Summary: In Hebrews 11:1-2, the author presents some aspects of the faith of the Old Testament saints and through this faith they received the promised future realities.**

### 1. Characterized Faith vv. 1

**Verse 1** contains a parallel statement. The word rendered "conviction" most often has the idea of disproof of an argument. It also includes the idea of the examination of evidence and the evidence or proof itself used to establish an argument (BDAG). The word rendered "assurance" was often used metaphorically to refer to real "substance," "essence," or "being" or sometimes to the process of coming into being. This usage of the word ("essence," "reality," "substance") is the universally accepted meaning in **Heb 1:3**.

Hence, the proper rendering of **Heb 11:1** is "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (KJV; NKJV).

**Heb 11:1** is not a definition of faith, but a characterization of some key aspects of the faith of the OT witnesses. A characterization does not give an exhaustive or abstract definition of something, but brings out certain key features or distinguishing outcomes of something (e.g. **James 1:27**). The author of Hebrews in chapter 11 is not directly addressing faith. Instead, he is dealing with the persevering faith of the OT saints in particular as they now testify to us as a "cloud of witnesses" (**Heb 12:1**).

### 2. Divine Testimony vs. 2

The key word in vs. 2 is rendered "received their commendation" (ESV), "received divine approval" (NASB), or "were commended" (NIV). Whilst it is true that this word can signify a positive testimony about someone, "to approve; praise" (Acts 6:3), this is not the meaning elsewhere in Hebrews (**Heb 7:8, 17; 10:15; 11:2, 4, 5, 9**).

Instead, the simple meaning here and elsewhere in Hebrews is to solemnly attest to the reality or truth of something: “to attest, testify, bear witness.” **Heb 11:2** is connected to the characterization of faith in v. 1 as its supporting premise.

### 3. Testifying Saints vs. 2

The faith of the OT saints rested upon God’s promises spoken to them as solemn testimony by the Lord whose word is always reliable. Because of this, the saints who received this revelation and who responded with persevering faith have themselves, become “a cloud of witnesses” (**Heb 12:1**). The author does not call the OT believers of **Heb 11** examples for us to copy. Though that may be a secondary implication of our text, first and foremost, they are witnesses who testify to the reality of the heavenly things which God has promised to them and to us.

The phrase “cloud of witnesses” does not indicate that the believers of Hebrews 11 are mere spectators who watch us as we run our race, rather that they are those who actively bear testimony to us as witnesses. The saints of **Heb 11:4–40** whose faith eventually led them into perfection in a heavenly Mount Zion (**Heb 12:23**) stand as witnesses to us of the realities of the world to come and the benefits of entrusting ourselves to faith’s “founder and perfecter,” Jesus (**Heb 12:2**). Like Abel, the OT saints, even though dead, still speak (**Heb 11:4**).

Hebrews 11 shows that the author regards the whole OT as a witness to the future realities introduced by Christ “at the consummation of the ages” (**Heb 9:26**). All of this is grounded in the fact that God has borne witness first of all (**Heb 11:2, 4–5, 39**), and therefore faith becomes the “realization” and “evidence” of the unseen, hoped for things (**Heb 11:1**).

This chapter asserts that believing involves bearing testimony to what is believed. This is done by word and deed. The author of Hebrews similarly expresses the idea of the church bearing witness in the world through the related terms “confess” and “confession” (**Heb 3:1; 4:14; 10:23; 11:13; and 13:15**)

### 4. Unseen Things vs. 1

Faith places us into vital contact with the “reality” and “evidence” of “things hoped for” and “things not seen”. These “things not seen” are unseen because they are future but they are still historical events. E.g. Noah was warned “with regard to things not yet seen” (**11:7**). Likewise, the author of Hebrews compares the dignity and person of Christ with that of Moses (**Heb 3:1–5**). The connection between the two is their faithfulness to their respective offices. Moses was witness to future redemptive events as a servant in Christ’s household. In Hebrews 11, all the Old Testament saints recorded in Scripture are likewise invoked as witness to these things.